Talking to My Selves: A Journey into Awareness, Betty Hughes (The Path, 2010), pp. 264

At the age of 89, after a therapeutic journey that had begun several decades before, Betty Hughes had a powerful experience of healing, in which 'I was actually living what I had previously known about in theory.' (The bold type is hers.) She was finally able to connect with the moment when, because of extreme trauma, she had split apart into what she came to regard as separate 'selves'. Tracking it as it happens, she writes:

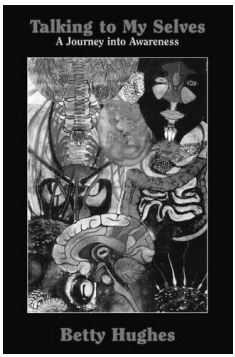
> Part of me…in reality…in 'now' time…really wants to avoid being in both sides of myself simultaneously……. This force is on auto pilot……. My observer self was watching the process unfold. I was aware that, way back in time, my inner clock knew when and why it had stopped. The ultimate crisis point had been reached. I had to cut out – split – there was no other choice.

This realisation comes as the climax of her remarkable autobiography, Talking to My Selves, which was twenty-five years in the writing and has been worked and re-worked many times. It is remarkable first of all for the honesty with which she writes about her struggles, and second for the depth of process and healing that it conveys. It would be hard to read this book without being affected by it and, having felt very much alone, it is Betty Hughes's intention to communicate her journey in a way that resonates with others.

Betty Hughes's childhood was – to say the least – unusual. The youngest daughter of a farmer who was sometimes rough and often angry, for several years she shared a bed with her fanatical Plymouth Brethren mother, who possibly used Betty to protect her from his brutality. Her mother was 'married to her Lord' and, from Betty's description, seems to have struggled with ordinary human relations. She imbued Betty with profound feelings of shame about sexuality and a deep self-distrust. During her childhood Betty had a strange encounter with a gypsy which for some time was largely forgotten.

Outwardly a cheerful, capable and forceful woman, Betty was first led to seek psychotherapy when she left the Christian community of which she had been

a member for ten years. With her first therapist she recovered memories of the gypsy's sexual abuse. Apparently believing he was helping her, he encouraged her into a prolonged sexual relationship which she also came to regard as abusive. Further and more successful attempts at therapy followed, first one-to-one and then in some of the innovative group work that appeared in the Seventies and Eighties. From then on her autobiography describes a succession of these. Frank Lake, William Emerson and Bill Swartley, all pioneers of primal and peri-natal work, were important figures for her at this time. She has continued to find a spiritual home with the Bridge Pastoral Foundation, which has continued Frank Lake's work within a Christian context. Eventually, having trained in Primal Integration with Bill Swartley, she began a long collaboration with Richard Mowbray and Juliana Brown. This lasted until, at the age of eighty, she decided to go solo and set up Hidden Treasures, a series of workshops where adults could explore their creativity in a variety of playful yet profound ways, all of which have been part of her own journey.



Talking to My Selves does not simply rely on the written word. The visual and imaginal world has always been important to Betty, and the book contains a rich collection of the collages, drawings and photographs – she is an accomplished photographer – which have been the vehicle for her self-exploration. Because of this interest in working imaginatively she was drawn to sandplay work and studied with Frau Dora Kalff, who pioneered it. In the intense process which she describes, sandplay figures embody the different aspects of herself which she had struggled so hard to reconcile.

Unusually in such a book, Betty's most recent process of healing is described not only by her but by Sarah, the clinical psychologist who worked with her when, at the age of eighty-eight, she felt she had come up against yet another blank wall. One of the recurrent themes of the book is Betty's intense frustration – sometimes painful to the reader - when gains seem not to last or repetitive patterns continue to play themselves out. Through the work with Sarah she seems to have developed not only a greater sense of acceptance but a cognitive framework with which to understand her experience. With Sarah's help she came to recognise the level of trauma that she had been carrying and could acknowledge its effects without having to find all the answers. She is deeply grateful for the modern understanding of trauma, as she is for all the help she has received.

Not that many ninety-year-olds have the energy to complete an autobiography, or would be prepared to expose as much of themselves as Betty Hughes has. Fewer still are continuing to explore in the way that Betty is, with her mixture of childlike wonder, creative imagination and sheer dogged persistence. Her work as a therapist and facilitator and her own deep self-exploration have gone hand-in-hand. Talking to My Selves shows us both, and the way in which she can perhaps finally make room for all the warring selves. The book does not minimise the difficulties she has met on her journey. Nevertheless, as a chronicle of a long and courageous life, it leaves us with a sense of great richness and hope.

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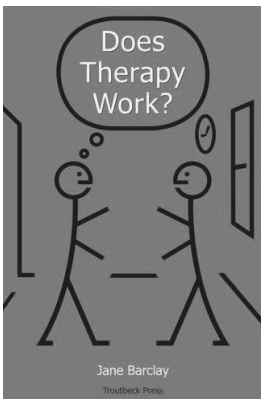
Does Therapy Work? by Jane Barclay (Troutbeck Press, 2011)

Back when I was in college, I had a poetry professor who was very fond of the question, 'Has the poem earned the right to say this?' There's a world of difference between second-hand insight and deep wisdom birthed through experience. It's just that on the page, it's not always easy to tell which is which, because some writers have a gift of taking the shop-soiled and shining it up as new. Jane Barclay might have that gift, for all I know, but it's not what she relies on here. This is a marvellous book, written from the heart of life.

Jane opens the book by recalling how stymied she was when a friend asked her, 'But does therapy work?' As someone who had already discovered the value of writing, she set about writing her way to a deeply personal answer. In so doing, she has answered a richer question: 'How, for you, does therapy work?'

In the book, Jane discusses both her work as a therapist and also her experience of being a client. In so doing, she produces an enthralling read. Time and again (particularly through her account of her clientship) I had the experience of deep, sometimes almost shocked, recognition - yes, that's exactly how it was - and on at least two occasions, Jane articulated something to me that I absolutely knew, but had never before brought to conscious articulation myself. It has been one of the more remarkable reading experiences I have had over the past few years, and I am immensely grateful to have had it.

All of which sounds, perhaps, rather rhapsodic, and maybe it is - because I loved this book. But to rhapsodise would be to miss the grit of the book. Jane is at her best, I think, writing about darkness and danger, about the passages of bloody struggle and grinding hard work that characterise periods of intense personal growth. She writes viscerally of the kind of therapeutic journey that I certainly recognise as absolutely authentic.



For all its excellence - or, actually, precisely due to its excellence - this is an unusually tricky book to review. For me, this book is performative. The impact of the book only comes from the experience of reading it, and of entering into dialogue with it. Its not one of those 'ideas' books, whose central theme can be summed up in a couple of sentences (thus saving the bother of reading it) - and, anyway, I don't want to give too much of Jane's story away.

For me, the achievement of this book is that it manages searing personal honesty, without falling into narcissistic self absorption. We really do need more books like this. I'm sure I can't be alone in finding many 'therapy books' dull as ditchwater. I plough through them in pained duty - and maybe come away with a couple of new ideas. I raced through Jane's book eagerly, and came away with several personally significant new insights. I know which I'd rather read.

Neill Thew

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